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# Hansel and Gretel as Abandoned Children: Timeless Images for a Postmodern Age

The image of the abandoned child has a long genealogy in Western literature. Our common cultural heritage includes the stories of baby Moses left floating in the bulrushes and the founding of Rome by the orphans Romulus and Remus. We remember learning in school how the Spartans exposed female and weak male babies to the elements, letting only the strongest survive to join their warrior society. John Boswell has provided a more scholarly account of the extent to which children were abandoned by their parents in Western Europe from late antiquity to the Renaissance in The Kindness of Strangers, concluding that it was a ubiquitous practice, institutionalized in many social arrangements, documented in legal records, often celebrated in literature of the period. More recently, the abandoned child appeared as a continuing motif in the didactic literature for children of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A striking example is Babes in the Woods, which appeared first as a broadside ballad, then as a chapbook, and achieved respectability in a picture book by Randolph Caldecott in 1879, in spite of Sarah Trimmer's claim that it was unfit for children (Carpenter 111).

The abandoned child also figures in folk literature. "Abandoned or exposed children" is one of the motifs listed under the classification "Unnatural Cruelty" in Stith Thompson's "Motif Index of Folk-Literature" (409). Among the folk tale characters most familiar to American children are Snow White, ordered killed by her stepmother; Cinderella, abused if not physically abandoned; and of course, Hansel and Gretel, left to die in the woods by their father and stepmother. My intent in this paper is to focus on "Hansel and Gretel," examining its meaning and relevance to contemporary children. After reviewing the most pertinent critical analyses of this story by contemporary scholars, I will examine four illustrated versions of the story published within the last thirty years.

"Hansel and Gretel," one of the tales collected by the Grimm brothers, is an example of a common type of European tale in which children fall into the hands of an ogre, tale type 327A in the Aarne-Thompson classification scheme (Thompson 481). The story outline is familiar: a woodcutter and his wife (sometimes identified as the children's stepmother) have fallen on hard times. The wife suggests that the children be left to fend for themselves in the woods. Hansel hears the parents planning this and gathers pebbles, which he drops along the way as the children are led deep into the forest. As the moon shines on the pebbles, he is able to lead his sister Gretel home again. When the parents again take the children into the forest, they prevent

Hansel from taking pebbles. This time he leaves crumbs of bread along the path. When he tries to follow the bread crumbs home, he discovers that birds have eaten them; and the children are now truly lost. A bird leads the children to a charming house made of cakes and other sweet things. Here the witch entices the children in to eat, then imprisons Hansel, intending to fatten him up before she eats him. Hansel outwits the myopic witch by showing her a bone instead of a finger when she asks to see how fat he is getting. At last, the witch decides to eat him anyway and lights the fire. Gretel succeeds in pushing the witch into the oven, and the children escape, taking with them the treasure which the witch has hidden in her home. A duck leads them across a river and back to their home, where the father now lives alone and welcomes the children back in a happy reunion (Opie 238-44).

Much of the critical commentary on this melodramatic and fanciful tale has emphasized its psychological content. Bruno Bettelheim, of course, is the standard source for psychoanalytic interpretations of the classic European folk tales. In The Uses of Enchantment, he has popularized his idea that fairy tales convey meaning to children, helping children deal with their unconscious, including the dark side of their nature. Like the child's own view of the world, fairy tales polarize the world into good and evil, black and white. Acknowledging that folk tales are also works of literary art, Bettelheim points out that their psychological effects operate at a subconscious level. He writes, "Fairy tales enrich the child's life and give it an enchanted quality just because he does not quite know how the stories have worked their wonder on him" (19). Bettelheim comments at considerable length about the particular wondrous effect that "Hansel and Gretel" works on young readers or listeners. Bettelheim sees "Hansel and Gretel" as a kind of coming-of-age story, in which the children learn effective ways of dealing with the world (159-66). It is a voyage of self-discovery in which the children learn the follies of regression and denial and discover the empowerment of self-reliance and independence.

At a still more abstract level, the child learns from fairy tales like this one how to use symbols to work through psychological struggles. Thus, the gingerbread house is an image that works powerfully on the minds of children. Bettelheim points out that the child recognizes at a conscious level that he, too, like Hansel and Gretel, would be tempted to eat up the delicious house. At an unconscious level, the child absorbs the symbolism of the house, as the image for the satisfaction of the most primitive desires, for the attractive temptation of oral greediness. As Bettelheim goes on to say, "The fairy tale is the primer from which the child learns to read his mind in the language of images, the only language which permits understanding before intellectual maturity has been achieved" (161).

Like Bettelheim, Maria Tatar finds power in the symbolism inherent in "Hansel and Gretel." She notes that the story occurs

in a supernatural realm that invites interpretation. The plot itself is spare: X threatens Y, who is weaker than X; Y turns the tables on X and emerges victorious. In its simplicity, it invites multiple readings and personal interpretation. She finds it interesting that the framework to the central action in this story is realistic, if melodramatic. The abandonment of the children is plausible; their reunion with their father is described realistically. Only while the children are in the forest do the events occur in a fantastic arena (Tatar 49-52). Jack Zipes also notes the importance of the forest in the Grimms' tales. He writes, "The forest allows for enchantment and disenchantment, for it is the place where society's conventions no holder hold true. It is the source of natural right, thus the starting place where social wrongs can be righted" (45). Ruth Bottigheimer elaborates: "The forest embodies and expresses noncommunity and thus, harbors egregious creatures like witches, as in 'Hansel and Gretel'" (102).

Looking at the historical context in which "Hansel and Gretel" was first told to the Grimms, Tatar notes that:

> . . . child abandonment--along with infanticide--was not so uncommon a practice among the poor as to make its fictional portrayal appear more sensationalistic than realistic. And given the high mortality rate for women during their childbearing years, a stepmother in the household (and a hostile one at that) came perilously close to counting as the rule rather than the exception. (49-50)

One could make a convincing argument that child abandonment continues today as a practice in the United States, citing, for example, the evidence of crack babies who are left behind in hospital nurseries by their addicted mothers or the increasing numbers of children waiting for foster homes, thus providing a continuing historical relevance to this folktale. What I propose to do instead, however, is to compare four contemporary illustrated versions, one published in each of the last four decades, teasing out the author/illustrators' intent or interpretation of the story and the possible contemporary child reader's response to each.

Nibble Nibble Mousekin is Joan Walsh Anglund's illustrated 1962 retelling of the folktale. The title page is encircled with a border of strawberry plants and shows the children--with the trademark Anglund faces of wideset dots for eyes and no mouths or noses--having a picnic with a white cloth spread on a lush green lawn dotted by those decorative (and presumably nonpoisonous) toadstools, a ubiquitous design motif in the early 1960s. The children sit under a spreading tree whose thick undifferentiated pastel foliage droops down comfortingly. The gingerbread house (paired with more of those ubiquitous toadstools) figures as an element of the title typography. There is no indication that this story might have a dark or frightening side; all is sweetness and light, including a bright yellow sun, drawn as

young children often do as a circle with rays coming out of it. The title itself is cute and comforting, with its diminutive of mouse.

The story opens with the usual background information that these were hard times, with not enough to eat. There is little in the accompanying illustration to back this up except for the patches on Hansel's breeches and Gretel's apron. As the story continues, the father is presented as strong in body but perhaps somewhat weak in wit, as he gives in to the "selfish stepmother." His part in the abandonment is left ambiguous; the stepmother claims they are only going to the woods to gather berries so the children will not be hungry. It is never explicit in the text that the children are deliberately left behind; they simply find themselves "lost," without their parents. In spite of this apparent ellipsis in the plot itself, the pictures make clear that the stepmother is wicked, with her long, pointed nose and evil smile, while the father looks merely sorrowful. The children are passive figures; Hansel just happens to have pebbles in his pocket which he drops to leave a trail. There is no forethought to his actions, and this is consistent with the lack of apparent foresight in the parents' leaving the children in the woods.

The Anglund woods are indeed deep and dark, with gnarled roots and branches reaching to ensnare the innocent children, but the gingerbread house is delectable. "Its roof dripped with thick white frosting, and it sparkled with gum drops and peppermint sticks. Its chimney was a cookie, and the windows were clear sugar. To the hungry children it looked delicious." Indeed. The witch, who bears an unmistakable physical resemblance to the stepmother, beckons to the children with a wee little voice:

*"Nibble nibble mousekin,*
*Who's nibbling at my housekin."*

The children are absorbed with their eating and ignore the voice until the witch opens the door and confronts them. She soothes their fears in "a voice as sweet as honey" and offers them all the traditional good things to eat--pancakes and honey, milk, apples, and nuts. The abundance of goodies overflows, spilling onto the accompanying page--cupcakes, candy canes, hot cross buns, and decorated pies. The child reader is not allowed to be fooled, however, because the narrator reveals: "For this old woman, who pretended to be so sweet and kind, was really a mean and crafty old witch who had built that sweet, sugary cottage on purpose to catch little children and pop them into her oven and make a grand feast of them."

The witch reveals her intentions soon enough, dragging Hansel off to a cage where he is locked up to be fattened into a "plump, tasty meal." Gretel bursts into tears, but she must do as the witch orders. There is little to prepare for her sudden insight when the witch tries to trick her into testing the oven, but Gretel does guess what the witch has in mind and succeeds in

pushing the witch herself into the oven. As the children flee from the gingerbread house with their pockets full of the gold and treasure which they find lying around, who should they see but their father, "who had been searching day and night for his lost children." There is a joyous reunion, made even happier by the revelation that the stepmother had run away, "frightened by the evil things she had done."

Anglund's retelling denies much of the psychological content attributed to the story by Bettelheim and in its effort to edit out the more unsavory elements leaves much of the action apparently unmotivated. Evil is replaced by ugliness, clearly a dreaded quality in Anglund's cloyingly cute world. The intent is evidently to spare children any unpleasantness they might associate with the story. I have talked to children, however, who are disturbed by the truncated features of the children--"How do they talk? How do they breathe?" This is perhaps a version more for adults who do not trust children's abilities to handle frightening or unpleasant realities than one to which children would turn by choice.

Adrienne Adams' Hansel and Gretel (1972) takes place in a more conventional folktale landscape. The title page identifies that landscape--the small cottage, the family, and the thick woodland, its trees bare of all leaves, all against a deep blue sky. In the first illustration we see clearly that times were indeed hard; the parents lie sleepless in their bed, their gaunt faces reflecting their worry.

The stepmother is more overt here in her plot to abandon the children: "They will never find their way home, and so we'll be rid of them." The father objects but gives in unhappily when his wife calls him a fool. Hansel is presented from the first as a responsible lad who promises to take good care of his sister, gathering pebbles with foresight. The woods in which the children are abandoned are indeed deep and dark, but the pebbles gleam in the moonlight, leading them home. Adams retains the motif of the helpful birds, focusing a half-page illustration on the white bird that leads them to the witch's house, less cloyingly delectable than Anglund's; it is made out of brown bread and cookies. The children are not tempted by its sweetness but by its promise of nourishment. "Here is where we ought to pitch right in," says Hansel, "and have ourselves a good meal." The witch, when she appears, is an old woman, leaning on a crutch, dressed in the conventional pointed black hat and long black gown of a fairy-tale witch, with a wart on her long, pointed nose and scraggly gray hair. She entices the children with clean white sheets in two beautiful little beds as well as with a delicious meal. The narrator does not telegraph the witch's evil to the reader; she merely describes the woman's actions--locking Hansel in a shed, shaking Gretel awake and putting her to work, feeding Hansel the best food, leaving the shells for Gretel.

When the witch finally announces that she will eat Hansel no matter how fat or thin he is, Gretel bursts into tears. She is the little sister, after all. Yet she, too, has her moment of heroism when she sees through the witch's stratagem and tricks the old woman into entering the oven herself. The witch howls as the fire burns, and the narrator tells us that it was really gruesome. But Gretel is unmoved and runs to free her brother.

The children realize the value of the treasures in the witch's house; "these are even better than the pebbles," says Hansel. They make their way out of the forest until they come to the wide river that figures in traditional tellings of this story. Their reactions are consistent with their sensible, practical responses to earlier trials. Hansel observes that there are no bridges or even planks on which they may cross. Gretel notices the lack of ferryboats but points out that they might ask the white duck that is swimming there if it will help them across. She also admonishes Hansel when he suggests that they both climb on the duck's back. "No," she says, "it would be too heavy for the little duck. It will have to take us over one at a time." The duck does, against the brilliant blue sky of the title page. The children find their way home to the usual joyous reunion with their father; the wife has died while the children were away. "And so all their troubles were over at last, and they lived together in perfect happiness."

Adams' retelling is true to the traditional versions of the story, and her visual interpretations tend to emphasize the symbolic content, particularly that of the forest. Much is made of the vastness of the blue sky and the openness of the clearing around the children's home while the forest, by contrast, is not only dark but thick with trees which crowd even the witch's house. The forest--the setting for the more surreal aspects of the story--is dense, opaque and nearly impenetrable, while the everyday world of home is light and bright and clear. The people who inhabit this world remain indistinct in the illustrations; but the children come alive in the text as sensible, competent survivors, much like the protagonists that Bettelheim describes. The witch is a conventional figure, with visual cues that most children can recognize as being properly witch-like. She is not confused in the text or the illustrations with the stepmother; she is clearly the witch, nothing more and nothing less. This is a satisfying story for most children, retaining its "once upon a time" qualities while endowing its young hero and heroine with reassuring survival skills that would be useful in any number of tough situations.

Anthony Browne's controversial 1981 rendering of Hansel and Gretel, on the other hand, does not take place in the conventional landscape of fairy tales. Its setting lies somewhere in between the contemporary world of Maggie Thatcher's England and the surreal landscapes of Salvador Dali. The title page suggests the central theme of this telling, with its stark typography on a white page with a thin black border. The sole

illustration is a square cage containing a white bird on a swing. This is a story about imprisonment, loss of liberty, and betrayal.

The text opens with the usual declaration of the family's poverty. Indeed, the situation in this contemporary living room is bleak. The mother stares blankly at a TV screen while the father and two children sit at a table. He is reading a newspaper, perhaps looking at the employment ads. Hansel stares at the table; Gretel looks at her father. The wallpaper hangs in shreds; the light bulb is bare; the tablecloth is torn. The rug is soiled and stained; a doll (dressed like Gretel in a striped dress) lies face down on the floor, foreshadowing the children's fate. Later, we see the children and their parents asleep in the same room, reflected in the mirror of a dresser littered with the mother's cosmetics; her stockings and underwear hang out of the opened drawers. The children's real mother, not a stepmother, is slovenly as well as unloving. She is also verbally abusive, calling the children "lazybones" as she awakens them in the morning and belittling Hansel as an idiot when he lags behind on the way to the forest. The forest has no leaves, only the twisted trunks and branches of trees and red and white toadstools, as clearly poisonous as Anglund's were benign.

Browne's Hansel is as resourceful as Adams' young hero. Hearing his parents talk about their plans, he prepares to take care of his sister by gathering pebbles in the moonlight. He comforts his sister when the children find themselves left behind by their parents and leads her home when the moonlight shines on the pebbles, as he had known it would. They are met at home by the sight of their mother staring at them through the barred window of the door, with the wilderness of the forest reflected behind her unwelcoming face. That night, Hansel looks out from that same window, trapped behind the door that his mother has locked to prevent him from collecting the life-saving pebbles. Later, the children's first glimpse of the witch will be through the barred window of the gingerbread house, her weak eyes squinting and her thin mouth stretched in a frown. Later still, their reunion with their father will take place in the frame of the open door of their home.

The Browne children are allowed to show emotions. In the opening illustration, Gretel looks at her father with concern and empathy, while Hansel appears depressed and remote. Abandoned in the forest with no resources to get them out, the brother and sister look worried. The caged Hansel is the very figure of despair. And the last illustration, although showing only one arm of each child around the back of their father, resonates with relief.

Browne is clearly mining the story for every ounce of psychological gold, with a trace of social commentary as well. It is possible that by placing his story too unambiguously in the present, he is sabotaging his own attempt to emphasize the dark

emotional content. If Bettelheim is right, children read the emotional subtext subconsciously. By bringing the emotional content to the surface for an overt reading, he may be denying it the very power that he intends to convey. This story moves out of the realm of the fairy tale and into the sphere of social realism. It becomes a story about one real family rather than a story about timeless universal truths.

The final story for consideration is also the most recent, Hansel and Gretel, retold and illustrated by James Marshall in 1990. While retaining all of the basic plot elements of the traditional tale, Marshall has created a new reading through his inventive, cartoonish illustrations. Looking at this title page, we see the familiar elements--trees, the usual toadstools, the white bird, and the two rosy-cheeked children dressed in peasant clothes. Gretel is a plump, little dough-faced child, sitting primly on a stack of logs with her hands crossed in her lap and a wide-brimmed hat on her head. Hansel leans against a tree in his leather, laced vest and tattered breeches, barefooted and reading a book. He is nearly laughing out loud; here is a boy who is on to something.

Again, the opening scene raises questions. The woodcutter is described as poor, and the house is certainly humble, but the father and children look happy. Only the mother appears dissatisfied, with her little piggy eyes and furrowed brow; but she is immensely fat and eating an apple with her great buck teeth. Times cannot be that bad! Family dynamics are established more clearly on the next page. This must be the stepmother; she refers to Hansel and Gretel as "those wretched children of yours" when she talks to her husband. The woodcutter is a wimp "afraid of his wife's ferocious temper." Gretel knows what is happening. "She doesn't like us," she says. Hansel denies this, but he does not mean it.

As this family marches off into the forest, Hansel is confident and sassy, dropping pebbles along the path like a good fairy-tale hero. Yet he looks genuinely scared as he and Gretel sit alone in the woods. Again Gretel is the character who voices the unpleasant reality: "Are you frightened?" she asks. "Of course not," Hansel replies. Later, when the children return home after their first night in the forest, the father holds out his arms. The mother raises her hands, saying, "We thought you were *never* coming back!" Hansel looks unconvinced, while Gretel just looks happy to be home.

Marshall's witch house is an obscenity of sugar confections. Although the text describes the children's activities in the usual way, with Hansel breaking off a piece of the roof and Gretel eating a piece of the sugar window, the pictures present another story. Hansel appears to have a stomach ache, and Gretel is eating her candy as if under penalty of death. Both children look miserable. The witch is as fat as their stepmother, but she is clearly a different woman. Her nose is a long pointed affair

with a green tip, while their mother's is like a pig's snout. Both women have unnaturally pink cheeks and red rosebud lips. The witch has the added attraction of green fingernail polish. Dopey Hansel likes this pretty witch. "She's nice," he says. "Hmmm," says Gretel. When the witch shows her true colors and locks Hansel in a Victorian birdcage, Gretel shows her spunk: "You let my brother out!" she cries. We're not surprised when she is successful in luring the witch to the blazing oven and giving her a tremendous shove; we knew that this child had unexpected reserves. Even Hansel has to admit it: "What a clever little sister I have!" he cries.

Marshall's telling ends with the trip across the river--this duck carries both children easily--and Gretel's spotting of their father's house in the distance. The final picture shows Gretel, festooned with jewels gathered in the witch's home, sitting on her father's lap. She seems to be looking at Hansel. The father closes his eyes and smiles contentedly. He wears a large ring from the witch's booty on one hand. Hansel, also draped with jewels and wearing a bracelet on one ankle stands with one hand on his father's axe. The white bird sits on his head. He looks confidently out of the page, inviting the reader to share his good fortune or the next good adventure that happens to come along.

Marshall's juxtaposition of traditional folktale elements with comic book visuals and contemporary dialogue is an appropriately postmodern approach for children of the 1990s. His treatment of Hansel and Gretel indeed uses "traditional forms in ironic or displaced ways to treat perennial themes," one of the defining themes of postmodern writing, according to Christopher Jencks (7). There is a self-consciousness about this approach to folklore that makes it particularly accessible to self-consciously hip and sophisticated kids. They can laugh at it, get the jokes, distance themselves from its "childishness"--and still allow themselves to experience its appeal, to work its wondrous effect on them. In its pastiche of traditional folklore and tongue-in-cheek, humorous illustrations, Marshall's Hansel and Gretel approaches the parody that Frederic Jameson describes in "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" as an irresistible urge in postmodern literature. This Hansel blunders through the story much like Bart Simpson blunders through his TV episodes, meaning well, screwing up, putting on the best face in a bad situation. How children love the bravado of this "underachiever--and proud of it."

Many children must feel like Hansel and Bart Simpson as they go about their lives in a world that careens about them apparently out of control. Even the adults do not seem to have it under control. The woodcutter cannot protect his children from abandonment in the woods; Homer Simpson cannot protect his son from the arbitrary decisions of the school principal; and some American parents cannot protect their children from drive-by shootings. None of us can protect our children from knowing

about a terrible war in the Persian Gulf or assure them with certainty that they are absolutely safe. James Marshall and Matt Groening are on to something; maybe humor is the best defense if one is absolutely powerless otherwise. Their image of the child as a sweet smart aleck, hip but vulnerable, rejecting the authority that has in so many ways rejected him, is as up-to-the minute as the nightly news. In Postmodernist Culture, Steven Connor discusses the difficulty of understanding the contemporary. How can we really understand contemporary events without the hindsight of historical perspective? The question in itself reflects a postmodern concern; it is only recently that we have questioned our ability to interpret the present. Is this because the present is so complex and fragmented today? Children today certainly have more to absorb in order to figure out what is going on in their world than they did in earlier generations. Cable television brings them a war happening 6,000 miles away as it happens as well as the latest rock videos.

It could be argued that these postmodern kids need the timeless truths of fairy tales more than ever, and the relevance of Hansel and Gretel most of all. If so, they have these many versions to choose from in their local libraries. Anglund's retelling is too sappy; the blood's been sucked out of it, leaving only the sticky surface of the story. Adams' edition would appeal to some: it looks "right" for a German fairy tale, and all the traditional elements are left intact. Browne might strike too close to home for many children; its emotional truths are too naked and raw. And then there's James Marshall, right on target for the media-blitzed, sweet and savvy children of the '90s.

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